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Moscow Angrily Settles Back To Await End of Reagan Era

By LESLIE H. GELB

The dominant impression from 10 days of recent conversations with Soviet leaders in Moscow is that they are waiting for developments in three key areas: to see whether Washington will have the necessary political support to deploy new missiles in Western Europe; to gauge whether politics will push the Reagan Administration toward compromises, and, above all, to find out how the Soviet leaders will ultimately fare under the new leadership of Yuri V. Andropov.

Compared with conversations with many of the same officials and academic experts in the past, even after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in late 1979, there seemed to be outright hostility toward Washington. The feelings of the Soviet officials seemed to match the hostility President Reagan expressed in his "focus of evil" speech of March 8.

There also seemed to be more than the usual reluctance to acknowledge any faults of their own, less hope about and even less interest in improving relations with the United States, and greater felt but unspoken uncertainty about their own future.

These are the principal impressions from conversations from March 7 to March 17 with Soviet military, civilian, party and academic officials in Moscow and Kiev, in restaurants, in walks along gray boulevards and in the conference rooms of foreign policy institutes where outsiders are usually dealt with.

Almost all of these conversations — whether with Asian, Middle Eastern, economic or American specialists — came to focus on the issue of missiles in Europe. The message they wanted to convey was that this issue was pivotal.

The issue of whether the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will actually begin deploying the new United States Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in Europe this December is the dividing line, they insisted.

In exchange for no deployment, they promised undefined benefits. Otherwise, they said, there would be an unspecified but sharply stepped up arms race. "New rules of the game will apply," one official said.

Mobilize Pressure in Europe

Under no circumstances, the Soviet officials said, will Moscow sign an agreement that will in any way legitimize the deployment of even one new American missile. If the missiles are deployed beginning in December, the officials will play upon and stimulate divisions within countries like West Germany and tensions between Western Europe and the United States.

The Soviet officials are readying the deployment of their own new intercontinental-range, medium-range and battlefield missiles as a response. Even though they are told that this will only prove Soviet bellicosity and play into Mr. Reagan's hands, they insisted they would go forward. Their judgment seemed to be that while Mr. Reagan's position might be strengthened in the short run, in time Americans and Europeans would turn against an arms race.

The officials talked as if they saw little hope of influencing the Reagan Administration directly. But they did seem to believe that Mr. Reagan had a history of responding to political pressures, and their diplomacy seemed aimed at mobilizing such pressures in Europe and the United States to push him toward compromise.

What the Officials Said

Much of what they said was predictable, but sometimes key officials made stunningly flat and evocative statements, difficult to evaluate by themselves. So much about Soviet behavior depends on context, on the larger picture, on overall strategy, on their own internal politics, but these are some of the things these officials said:

¶Moscow is prepared to accept a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, as called for in President Reagan's Middle East peace proposal, but only as a step toward an independent Palestinian state — an idea rejected by Mr. Reagan.

¶Word has been passed to Washington that the SAM-5 long-range surface-to-air missiles recently installed in Syria will continue to be manned by Soviet troops as a "calculated decision" to draw the line against possible Israeli attack; the implication that the Soviet Union would in some way respond against Israel was clear.

¶The Soviet Union will not under any foreseeable circumstances increase its military presence in Afghanistan, despite its charges that the United States has secretly stepped up the quantity and quality of arms being sent to the Afghan guerrillas.

¶Moscow will not return the Kurile Islands to Japan as part of any "peace offensive" or in any other way. Like Germany, Japan will have to get used to the idea of "lost" territory, the official said.

¶"Substantial détente" has already been achieved with China, and Moscow is prepared for mutual troop withdrawals from the 4,500-mile border and to make concessions to Peking on border disputes.

¶The Soviet Union believes that nuclear war, once begun, will inevitably become all-out warfare and cannot be limited and controlled — that from Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff and First Deputy Defense Minister, after years of writing the contrary view.

¶When Soviet-American relations are bad, Moscow looks for places — such as Central America — "to exploit American weaknesses," but not, as one official put it, to "explode them." "This is, after all, a game of power," the official said.

Sometimes, officials and experts flatly disagreed with each other. Most, like Aleksandr Y. Bovin, the senior political commentator of Izvestia, argued that the Reagan Administration was highly unlikely to ever get serious about negotiations with Moscow, yet they felt "realities" demanded keeping the door open.

Treat U.S. Like Albania

Others maintained that Mr. Reagan was actually moving toward the traditional center already and had to do so. Several, it seemed for the record, insisted that Soviet-American ties had to be written off for years to come, and that America should be treated like Albania.

Most stated that Moscow would not for many years to come invite large-scale trade with the United States — "too unreliable a trading partner." But

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Vladimir N. Sushkov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, said that Moscow was ready at any time to increase trade and that volume could quickly reach $15 billion a year. The current level is about $1 billion.

Soviet officials and research experts did not hide their feelings about the Reagan Administration. Many of these same officials and experts spoke openly two and a half years ago of their hope that Mr. Reagan would turn out to be another Richard M. Nixon, a man who would be able to deal with the Soviet Union and make the deals stick politically in Washington.

But Mr. Reagan surprised them, and in their eyes, he became a radical. Judging from public Soviet statements, this mood has clearly worsened since Mr. Reagan's speech of March 24, in which he called for a major scientific drive to develop an advanced system to defend against missile attacks. Soviet statements on the subject stressed that the Administration was opening up yet another new road in the arms race.

Most of the Soviet officials and experts interviewed said they believed Mr. Reagan would be re-elected. Mr. Bovin, who was less certain of this than others, nonetheless analyzed the prospects much as his colleagues did. "Reagan's re-election depends on the economic situation in the United States," he said. "The internal economic problems are more important than the arms race."

Andropov Keeps Door Open

At the same time, the officials and experts made clear that Moscow will do as little as possible to help re-elect Mr. Reagan. What they said, in effect, was that unless something was plainly in it for them, they would not want to see an Andropov-Reagan summit meeting.

But the Soviet leaders pride themselves on being realists and expect Mr. Reagan to be around for another six years. So, although most expressed deep pessimism about his moderating his stance toward Moscow, most said they are waiting to see and remain ready to deal. Notably, Mr. Andropov himself has kept the door open, saying that détente with the United States is not a thing of the past.

Underlying all else, Soviet officials and experts indicated that they are waiting for signs of what is going to happen in the Soviet Union itself. The unstated arguments and the unfinished sentences all wound back to Mr. Andropov. It was understood that no one would be able to do very much about anything until the internal power picture had resolved itself. While most photographs of Leonid I. Brezhnev have come down from the walls, few have been replaced by the visage of Mr. Andropov.

Criticism of Brezhnev

Mr. Brezhnev is no longer spoken of with reverence. Under him the Soviet economy and military power grew, they said. He was second to none in the search for peace, they said. But, it was often added, in his last years he may have been too preoccupied with foreign policy, thus allowing the economy to languish.

The Soviet officials made it clear they do not like to talk about internal power struggles or their system. Over lunch one day, one official was asked about the Stalin period. "We don't talk about it not because we know so little but because we know too much."